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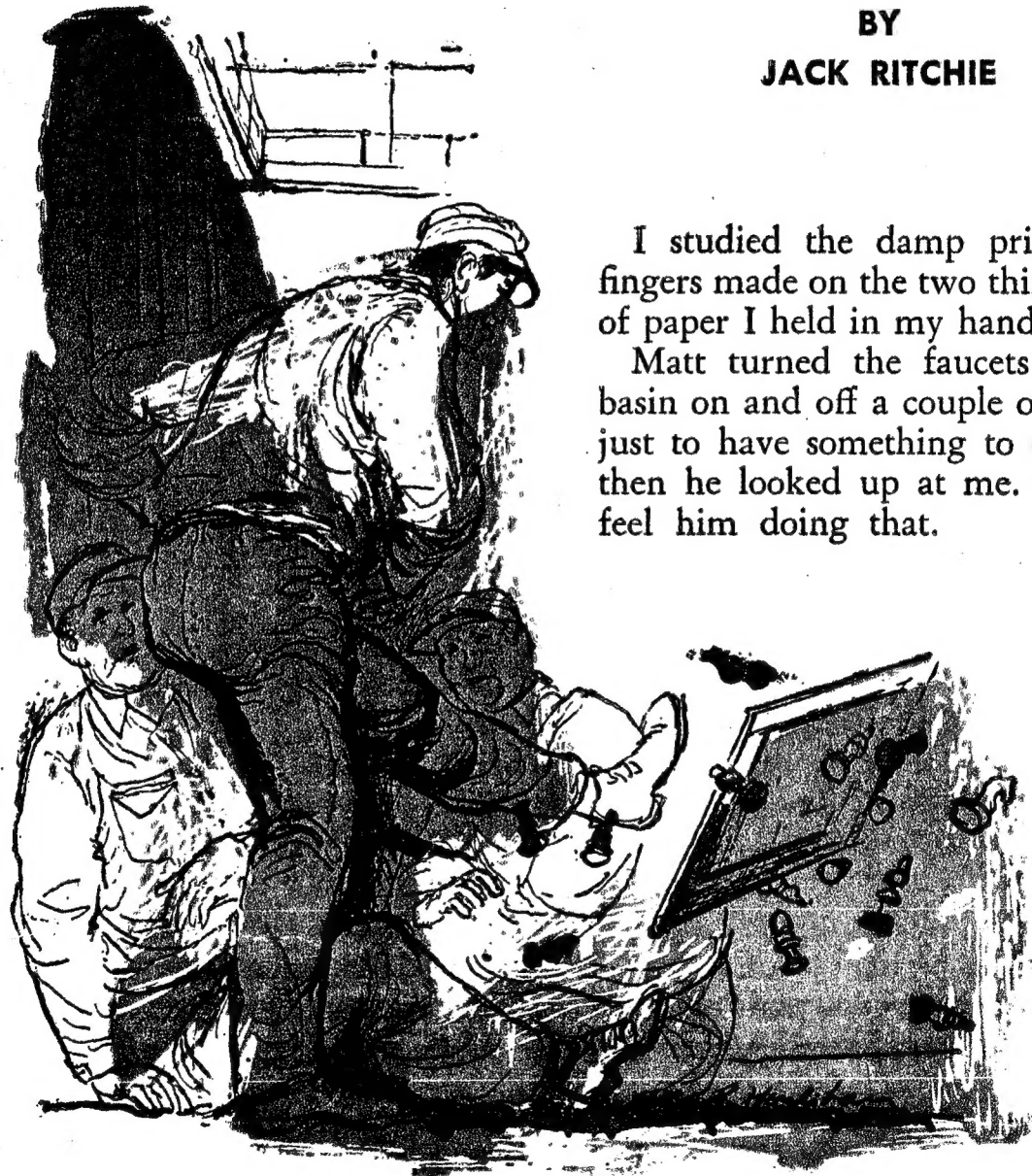
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I LAY ON the top bunk and listened to the canary in the second gallery and thought about the time when I had one in our cell.

Matt was listening too and he began to swear. He got off his bunk and spit into the toilet bowl.

# The Canary

BY  
JACK RITCHIE



I studied the damp prints my fingers made on the two thin sheets of paper I held in my hands.

Matt turned the faucets in the basin on and off a couple of times, just to have something to do, and then he looked up at me. I could feel him doing that.

*He had it made. The Big Wall lay behind him.  
All he had to do was keep walking...*

"Too bad we ain't got a canary any more," he said.

I began to fold the papers slowly.

"I said it's too bad we ain't got a canary any more," Matt said. "Old man, when I'm talking, you look at me."

I looked at him.

He let himself get the smile that never went to his eyes. "Now why did you have to go and kill the poor little bastard?"

"Because I'm mean," I said.

He nodded. "That's right." And he waited.

"I'm a ratty weasel," I said.

He nodded again. Then his eyes went to the papers I was putting in my pocket. He came over and took them out.

I put my hands behind my head and looked at the ceiling. I thought about the canary and how I'd held it in my hand and then crushed it.

After a while, Matt said, "All right, runt. What are these?"

"Nothing," I said. I could feel my stomach tightening.

He reached up and pulled me off the bunk. I bumped my knee coming down and closed my eyes against the pain.

"Don't tell me it's nothing," Matt said.

I opened my eyes and blinked away the water. "They're tracings of some plans," I said.

He let go of my shirt and looked at the sheets again.

"They're tracings of some plans I found in the warden's files," I

said. "One sheet shows a section of the old sewage system. The other one shows what part of it's being used today."

I took the sheets out of his hands and tracked with my forefinger. "This sewer pipe isn't being used today. It leads out of here down to the river."

Matt looked at me and then he smiled and sat down on his bunk.

"It goes under the carpenter shop," I said. "You got to get through four inches of concrete and five feet of dirt to get to it." I licked my lips. "It's two feet in diameter. And from where it ends, it's about two hundred yards to the river."

Matt kept his grin. "Anything more?"

"There's a grating at the end of it," I said. "You'd need a hacksaw."

He leaned back against the wall. "You been dreaming about this?"

"Just dreaming," I said. "I don't like tunnels."

Matt put his hands over one knee. "You got a job now. Get me into the carpenter shop."

I climbed back up on my bunk and lay down. I thought about crawling in a little tube with five feet of ground between you and the fresh air.

In the morning, after breakfast in the mess hall, I went to my job in the warden's office. I dusted his desk, the files, the window sills, and then I began sorting the mail.

The warden came into the office at nine and I stood up until he took his chair. Then I brought the mail to his desk and sat down with my pad of paper and a pencil.

He went through the stack and as he did he dictated answers to me. When he finished he lit a cigar.

"Morgan," he said. "I been hearing things. You want me to get you another cellmate?"

"No, sir," I said. "Not now." I closed my notebook. "Sir," I said. "Bronson would like to get a transfer to the carpenter shop."

He rolled the cigar in his mouth a couple of times and studied me. "Did he figure you got the influence to get him there? Nobody gets out of the laundry until he's put in a full year there."

"I was just asking, sir," I said.

He took the cigar out of his mouth. "How long have you been in here, Morgan?"

"Thirty-four years, sir," I said.

His grin showed the gold fillings in his teeth. "This is your home, boy. You wouldn't know what to do if I opened the gates for you."

I looked down at my notebook and didn't say anything.

"You got a nice warm and comfortable little cell," he said. "I hear you even put curtains on the windows."

"I took them down, sir," I said.

Out in the exercise yard during the free hour, I went to the sunny wall where Jim Wallace was sit-

ting on the ground with the chess board already set up.

I sat down on the ground and rolled a cigarette.

"Nice day," Jim said. "Won't be many more like this."

"Right, Jim," I said. "Guess I'm getting old. I can't stand cold weather any more. I get twinges like rheumatism."

Jim started a Casablanca opening. "Drop in at the dispensary and have the doc look you over."

"I don't know, Jim," I said. "If you're not bleeding, the doc don't think you're sick."

"Try it anyway," Jim said. "If he don't give you nothing for the pain, I'll see if I can get you something." Jim studied the board. "My canaries are three weeks old now. Would you care to have one?"

"I'll think about it, Jim."

"I know how you feel," he said. "I never thought I'd want another after Alfie died. But you get over it. They're good company."

We were down to the end game when Matt walked up to us and looked down. "What's going about getting me into the carpenter shop?"

"I talked to the warden this morning," I said. "But it's not that easy, Matt. Nobody gets out of his time in the laundry."

"I don't like the laundry," Matt said. "My hands get chapped."

"All I can do is talk to the warden," I said. "That's all I can do."

Matt studied us for a while and then he hooked a toe under the chessboard and flipped it over.

Jim kept his eyes on the ground. I looked up at Matt for a few seconds and then I looked at the ground too.

Matt stood there laughing softly to himself and when he got tired of that he walked away.

I turned the board back over and we picked up the pieces.

"That's the sixth time he's done that," Jim said. "I'm keeping track."

"I know, Jim," I said. "So am I."

"We never bother nobody," Jim said. "I don't like other people to bother me either." He looked up from the board. "Your move."

Matt had to finish his two months in the laundry, but at the end of that time the warden transferred him to the carpenter shop.

After the first day there, Matt sat on his bunk and pointed to his shoes. I got down on my knees and began unlacing them.

"It's a cinch," he said. "We'll break into the pipe where it goes under the tool room. We got some privacy there."

I put his shoes under the bunk.

"I had to let the tool-room boys in on it," Matt said. "But they're not taking the trip. They don't like tunnels either. Just you and me go." He stretched his legs. "It'll take at least a week. It's got to be done slow and easy."

It took almost two, but when it was done, Matt came back to our cell grinning. "Pack your valise," he said. "We leave at two tomorrow afternoon."

"Matt," I said. "I can't just leave the warden's office when I feel like it."

"The hell you can't. You been here so long you practically got the run of the place. You're trotting all over on errands for him the whole day."

"Matt," I said. "Why do you want me to come along? I'll just slow you."

His grin came back. "You're my insurance. I don't read plans so good and if everything's not right, I want you to share it with me."

Around one-thirty the next afternoon, I let the warden notice that I wasn't feeling so good and he let me go to the dispensary.

Jim was at the typewriter in the empty waiting room pecking away on some medical records. He stopped when I closed the door behind me.

"I leave in about fifteen minutes, Jim," I said.

He looked around to make sure that we were alone and then he opened a desk drawer and took out a small flat bottle.

"A half pint," he said. "About fifty percent alcohol and flavored with orange juice."

"Thanks, Jim," I said. I put it inside my shirt, under my belt, and we shook hands.

"Good luck," Jim said.

I went outside to the carpenter shop and nodded to the guard lounging against a work bench.

"The warden wants me to do a check on the tool records," I said. "I'll be messing around here all afternoon."

He was considering a yawn. "Go ahead," he said. "Help yourself."

I went to the far end of the long room and into the tool cage by the side door. Matt was inside with a con I knew as Eddie and they were trying to look busy.

Matt glanced out of the wire cage to make sure that the guard wasn't interested and then he squatted down under the counter. He shoved aside a big cardboard box, switched on a flashlight, and we looked down into the hole.

I felt the color leaving my face as I smelled the sick air coming from it. I looked at Matt and I could see that he was beginning to sweat.

"Once you're down, I'll slide over the box," Eddie said. "I don't think anybody's going to miss you until the five o'clock check."

"Who goes first, Matt?" I asked. But I knew.

"You do," he said.

I reached under my shirt and brought out the bottle and unscrewed the cap.

"What's that?" Matt asked.

"I'll need a little something, Matt," I said. "My nerves aren't so good."

Matt looked down into the hole again and then he took the bottle away from me.

He took a big swallow and while he stood there trying to keep the stuff down, I reached for the bottle.

He slapped my hand away. "I'm not through yet," he said. He took a couple more swallows, waited a half minute, and then finished the bottle.

"Don't brood about it," he said, looking into my eyes. He handed me the hacksaw and a flashlight. "Get down there and start crawling. You know how to do that."

I lowered myself into the hole cut into the pipe. I began inching myself forward on my stomach, holding the flashlight and hacksaw in front of me.

After ten yards I stopped and waited for Matt to follow me. It was a long minute before I heard him behind me.

The pipe was foul with dead air and the stench of the dirt that covered the bottom of it. I would have tried to back up, but Matt was behind me and there was only one direction for me to go.

I went forward about twenty-five yards and then I stopped to rest. But Matt slapped at my heels and I had to go on.

The small stones at the bottom of the pipe began digging into my knees and elbows. I crawled fifty yards more and then I had to stop.

Matt began slapping at my heels again and he even scratched my



legs with his fingernails. "For God's sake," he said, his voice high. "Keep moving!"

"I got to rest," I said, over my shoulder. "You got to let me rest or I'll die here and you'll never get out."

At the end of five minutes I started forward again and the next time I stopped to rest Matt didn't bother me.

I lay there waiting for my heart to stop racing. When I began moving forward, I tried not to stop for rest again. But I had to stop twice more before I got to the grating.

I found that I had to remove the blade from the hacksaw in order to get at the ironwork and it took me about forty-five minutes to cut my way through.

I crawled out into the fresh air and looked back up the riverbank to where the prison walls were only fifteen yards away.

I thought about the canary I'd called Betty and I thought about how Matt had taken her out of the cage and put her in my hand.

I remembered how he'd put his big hands over mine and made me squeeze until she was dead.

I put up the collar of my jacket. It was cold out here. Too cold for a man who was in his sixties.

I started walking along the wall toward the front gate. I'd probably spend some time in solitary, but when they let me have my cell again, I could put up curtains. Matt wouldn't be there to laugh at them and make me take them down.

Nobody would bother to crawl through the pipe. I was pretty sure of that. They'd just seal it up and figure that Matt had got away.

Anyway, I'd tell them that he did.

It must have been about the halfway point when the barbiturates Jim had gotten for me caught up with Matt. There was enough in that bottle to kill him three times over.

Maybe he was dead now, or maybe he was still breathing.

I wondered if the rats would wait.

